

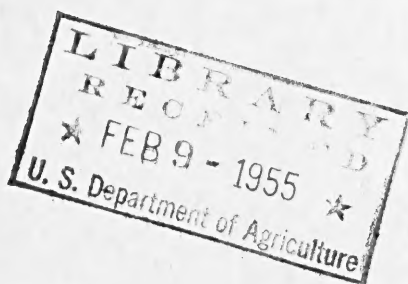
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HOLLY

*... Is Easy
to Grow*



By

Earle Dilatush

ROUTE 130

ROBBINSVILLE, N. J.



Holly Is Easy to Grow

A PLAIN DIRT FARMER TELLS HOW

The real story of the growing of American Holly is as interesting, exciting and fantastic as a fairy tale and the truth about this wonderful broad-leaved evergreen is as strange as fiction. Folks have always loved Holly, but, because its growth habit differs vastly from our other trees and shrubs, it is greatly misunderstood. I will tell you later why more Hollies have been planted in the last five years than during the preceding fifty, but first let's consider some of the reasons why Holly was so neglected for over two hundred years.

Things even when not based on fact repeated often enough become "truths" to most of us. Propaganda put out by a certain large country today has influenced millions of people to believe half truths or worse. Thus, nothing has hindered the planting of Holly here in America as much as stories handed down for decades that tend to have us believe that it (Holly) is hard to grow.

FEW KNOW REAL STORY OF HOLLY

One of the strange things about Holly is why these so-called "Truths" persist when there is no concerted dislike of Holly, rather these sayings are brought to us by friends who really are trying to help. This feeling that Holly cannot be successfully grown is so widespread that it has definitely hindered the planting of this wonderful evergreen. I know it discouraged me in my early efforts, but as I grew older it "backfired." Some of us will always want to do the very things at which everyone tells us we cannot succeed. Father said I was as stubborn as a mule and this, coupled with my love for Holly, just would not let me give up.

I have always been glad, however, that I first started to grow Holly as a hobby, not as a commercial venture, because I spent years of hard work and much money before I learned how to successfully handle them. Now people from all over the country come to my Holly Farm and many, possibly with a bit of envy, tell me how lucky I am. They say that all I have to do if in

need of money is to go out and dig a few specimens. Belief that when I dig and sell Hollies from my Holly orchards is like finding money is as far from the truth, though, as the "you cannot grow it" tales.

Somehow, few people have learned the real story of Holly. Will Rogers liked to tell us that all he knew was what he read in the papers, but he could not thus joke in reference to Hollies, for little has been put in print that deals directly with or tells plainly just how interested persons in America can raise Holly at home. I am just a farmer and feel ill equipped to tell the story of Holly, but the real truth is that the facts were worked out mostly by plain trial and error dirt farming.

HOLLY DIFFERS FROM OTHER TREES

Science has done much for the farmer in America and in horticulture it seems to have played a more important role, yet Holly has shown an almost complete indifference to recognized standards of culture. When approached the right way it is very cooperative, easy to work with and actually seems to want to grow and please. On the other hand, it can be stubborn and worse than a balky mule. Holly seems especially resentful toward modern practices that succeed with other plants and trees. This does much to explain why scientists, horticulturists and enthusiastic home owners—folks who have made a real success of growing things—sometimes fail miserably with Holly.

My early work with Holly was little more than a series of failures and for years I seemed to make no headway. Much of the trouble can definitely be traced to the use of chemical fertilizers. My assertion that these are often harmful to Hollies is considered just a whim by many, but I can supply very positive proof. My father was a good farmer, but his real interest was in fertilizer and we had a factory right on the farm; the business is now carried on by my twin brother in town a couple of miles away. So, you see I have worked in fertilizers all my life. Father believed in advertising and used much fertilizer on the farm. The crops we grew helped no little to sell our fertilizer, but their use on my Hollies proved a handicap. I will not take space to go more into detail, but urge all who plant Hollies to use chemicals sparingly. To the non use of chemicals can

be added a hundred and one practices proven O.K. for growing other plants that are taboo for Holly. All this seems to make it harder for those who know a lot about horticulture and explains why my clients who are "green" about such things often have the best luck with Holly. Success with Holly comes only when one is willing to put aside almost all hard earned horticultural knowledge and start anew with Mother Nature as guide and teacher.

FATE INTERVENES

I want to tell you a little about my early work with Holly. This means going back more than fifty years to the time when father said I was only "knee high to a grasshopper." It would seem that the hard work I put in, coupled with my love for Holly, should have brought success, but for years I made little progress although I contacted nearby Experiment Stations and bothered two or three well-known horticulturists half to death. I faithfully followed the suggestions of all who would listen to me until finally it seemed useless to waste more time. I took a trip to Maine to get away from it all, but somehow the unexpected happened and although I started out with the thought of running away from Holly, I actually almost ran into it. I like to think that each of us, to a great extent, make our own way in this world, but sometimes Fate intervenes. It would seem that Fate must have had a hand in my electing to stay on an island in Maine within a half-mile of the only two native Hollies along the Maine Coast. Although I have spent much time there during the past fifty years looking for additional Hollies (native) I have never found them. I have, however, established many there and the coastal section of Maine is one of the regions where sales are increasing rapidly.

Now, back to those two Hollies. They were wonderful specimens, perhaps a hundred years old and stood side by side in a small rocky meadow. "Aunt Lucy," the owner, loved them more than anything else in this world. Folks made fun of Aunt Lucy and called her "queer," but, though she was what we call poor, she nevertheless considered herself rich. She never tired of telling neighbors that money was common, as everyone had more or less of it, but she had something better than money—her Hollies. When I asked about their care she seemed puzzled and declared that,

like Topsy in Uncle Tom's Cabin, they just grew. No chemical fertilizer had been used or any manure from the heap which grew larger each year by the old barn. They had never been hoed or cultivated and the two cows that had the run of the meadow did the mowing.

There was no farming on the island such as I knew in New Jersey for most everyone made a living from the sea. Some folks had gardens where the only fertilizer used was an occasional fish placed under a hill of corn with sea weed as a mulch. I wanted to feed those Hollies so I caught a few fish and spent hours of hard work carting sea weed a half-mile up hill. I placed most of the material under the tree with bright red berries, but Aunt Lucy had me gather it up and put it under the tree that had never fruited. It seemed that each spring when those Hollies bore blossoms (male trees bear much heavier than female) she held high hopes that the barren Holly would have berries at last. You see, neither she nor I knew it was a male tree so she felt that love and care should bring to pass her greatest ambition—to have both Hollies bear berries. As a last gesture she willed that after death her ashes be spread under that barren Holly.

HOLLIES IN MAINE

The time I spent working around those Hollies in Maine had much to do with making Holly my life work. Those two wonderful specimens growing without aid of science way north of the accepted Holly district made me feel ashamed of acknowledging defeat and I went home to the farm more determined than ever to grow Hollies. Mother had a big farm dinner ready, but I held everything up while I made a quick inspection of the few scrawny little trees I loved so much.

I found less opposition than expected to my decision to renege on the promise I made father that I help with farm work and no more fooling around with Holly. Friends wanted to help and it would have been easy to start in again right where I had left off but I made up my mind to do something radical and sought help from an entirely different source—Mother Nature. Most of us spend too little time on nature study. Environment has much to do with this, for there are few virgin forests now. This is especially true in our metropolitan areas, but there is also much truth

in the old saying about not being able to see the forest for the trees.

Now I wish I could tell you that my troubles disappeared like magic, but the fact is that they seemed to multiply and again I almost gave up. I could not get rid of the feeling that somehow the solution would be found by working with nature, so I spent more and more time in the woods and learned much about the growth habit of Hollies.

Only after months did I feel it worth while to try transplanting to my farm again and the very first tree proved most important for with it came success. It still seems strange as I write this, more than fifty years later, that one little tree could do so much to change utter failure to a lifework of pleasure and profit.

DEER LED TO SUCCESS

I want to tell you how I found this little tree which grew deep in the woods way beyond the beaten path. Several times during my walks I saw a dog chase a deer and this always occurred at about the same hour late in the afternoon so I formed the habit of looking for them. Nevertheless, I was surprised and startled when they crossed my path one day not more than an arm's length away. Neither seemed to see me and both disappeared like magic seconds later.

Following their trail I came to a thicket of wild grapevines, catbriars and other shrubs. A tunnel extended into this mass that was about three feet wide and only a little higher. I entered on my hands and knees and have never been able to figure out how a buck with horns managed to speed through with a dog at his heels. After crawling through this tunnel I followed the deer trail for quite a long distance but stopped short when I spied the most attractive Holly I had ever seen and made up my mind on the spot that some day I would move it to my farm.

The finding of this little tree should have made me very happy but things did not work out that way. I was on pins and needles for months because I wanted it at my home where I could see it every day but hesitated to transplant for fear I might hurt or even kill this wonderful tree as I had dozens of others in former years. Father found fault with me for neglecting farm work and mother declared I must be in love which I did not deny, nor did I tell my brothers and sisters that

it was not with the girl they agreed upon but rather this Holly I have been telling you about.

DUG HOLLY WITH AXE

One day I decided to wait no longer and went to the woods with spade and shovel but found the little Holly different from others. It does not seem to make sense but the fact that it was so hard to dig was what really made it valuable. I believe it to be the only tree I ever dug with an *axe*. It grew in a large stump the inside of which had rotted completely away. A small quantity of soft wood remained but in some manner the stump had become almost completely filled with leaf mold. The outside rim remained solid—hard dead wood that required much labor to cut away. This done I did not use shovel or spade but simply lifted the tree with roots intact.

A glance at the root ball showed a near miracle. Instead of sparce, leggy roots such as I had found on those previously transplanted, this specimen had thousands of small feeding rootlets none of which had touched soil or earth, for all had been confined inside that old stump. This root system was a lovely thing to look at and I immediately thought of trying to find stumps to grow Hollies in on the farm but, on second thought, realized that it was not the stump that made all those rootlets but the leafmold inside the stump that the Holly grew in.

FOUND SECRET

This little tree was discovered many years ago but I will never forget its beauty for I have seen few to equal it and none with larger dark green leaves or more berries. However, when telling folks about it I am apt to forget to mention the most important fact of all—the millions of little rootlets developed in the leafmold in that old stump. It was no easy task to cut away the rim of the stump but when that little Holly was lifted out I realized that I had found "what makes Hollies tick," as my twin brother remarked. Taken to my farm and planted with lots of leafmold it was the first of thousands to live and prosper.

Hard everyday work in the soil has taught me much about Holly. I wish I could take the readers of this article to my Holly Orchards, for there many things that appear unusual, hard to believe, or quite impossible when put in print, are worked out as facts. Nothing is quite as real as

down to earth dirt farming, which has definitely proven Hollies easy to grow. The little Holly in that old stump paved the way because it showed, as nothing else could, the one real requirement for success—Leafmold.

Hundreds of people are planting Holly for the first time so I want to jot down a few facts and offer a suggestion or two, especially for "new folks." In former years few Hollies were planted other than in or near that small portion of the country where they grow wild. We were told they would not live "outside." This seemed to be borne out by the fact that most of the Hollies planted in the mountains or in the North (above New York City) did not thrive. Now, however, they are found in quantity in much of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine (along the coast), Nova Scotia, Canada (near the St. Lawrence), New York, Ohio, Michigan, Arkansas, most everywhere except in desert areas and the high Rocky Mountains. I have established them, though, in parts of Colorado, and Wyoming, but have failed thus far to get them to grow in the White Mountains. Quite surprising to many will be the knowledge that some Hollies are growing in Alaska. An Air Force Captain says they will not live twenty feet from the shore line there, an exaggeration, of course, but we do know that they must be planted very close to the water which warms the immediate coast line of Alaska. Fog makes it easier to grow Holly there than in much of Michigan. This sudden success now enjoyed by folks who are planting Holly most everywhere seems to merit some explanation.

HARD TO KILL WHEN ESTABLISHED

Most everyone loves Holly but many who would like to grow it have been afraid to plant for fear of failure, yet most of the difficulties of growing Hollies are purely imaginary and not founded on fact. You can plant any time of the year except when the ground is frozen hard, although April, May, September and October seem to be the best months. Little thought need be given to the type of soil as they will grow almost equally well in sand, clay, gravel or rock if lots of leafmold is used when transplanting. And you can place them on the north, east, south or west side of your house and in sun or shade.

Holly is a long lived tree and every one you plant should live a hundred years. They are re-

markably tough after they become established. Years ago, before I began growing Hollies from cuttings, I brought many to my farm from the wild. The best lot of all was found in a meadow where the owner, a dairyman, wanted to improve his pasture. He killed all brush and trees by cutting them to the ground. The Hollies, although cut off three times in ten years, did not die but grew on into real specimens. The owner was so glad to get rid of them that he refused the usual payment for such stock. My own Holly Orchards offer further proof of hardiness. Little trees sometimes spring up from portions of roots left when large trees are dug and these continue to grow on although we mow several times annually. Cutting to the ground seems to encourage growth and we get rid of these little trees only by digging them up root and all.

The hardiness of Hollies brings to mind a point I wish to emphasize. All Hollies are benefited by heavy pruning. Without it they are apt to grow leggy and spindling. The work is best done when Holly is dormant—say from Thanksgiving to Easter. You can cut berry twigs and branches at Christmas and not worry about loss of fruit the following year since flowers and berries form only on new wood. This applies to American Hollies. English and some other sorts form fruit buds on old wood.

NAMED HOLLIES ARE BETTER

I have told you about some of the places where Holly is now grown and suspect some, like many who visit my Holly Farm, will want to know "how come" the recent terrific increase in Holly planting that covers so much of our country. Well, we know more about Holly now and proof that it is hardy rather than tender has helped. Then too, the stock of responsible Nurserymen has been much improved. It seems sensible not to buy any old Holly but to select one of the named sorts. These vary, but all are sure to be better than the average with no name. I could mention other things that help to make up the present great popularity of Holly but what counts more than all else is the actual planting.

Take a minute to "think things out" and you will find planting Holly to be as easy as ABC, nothing complicated, just different. Those who attempt to grow Hollies will find its demands very exacting but easily met. Soil conditions must be

made somewhat like that found in the wild. Simply dig a hole at least twice the size of the root ball and put some leafmold in the bottom—oak is best, maple poorest—place tree and tuck in with lots of leafmold. Use at least a bushel of leafmold for each foot height of your tree. Now make a dyke a few inches high with some of the soil you took from the hole. This should form a circle just under the outside branches. Soak well and water every ten days during the first summer. Water costs little, helps much.

HOLLY PLANTED RIGHT WILL GROW

Oak leafmold can often be found on the very estate where Holly is to be planted and its cheapness sometimes proves to be its worst fault. Folks are so apt to think of Holly as being something special and insist that a costly fertilizer be used, but fifty years of experience has proven that no man-made fertilizer helps Hollies at planting time like oak leafmold. I suspect that it contains some of the so-called trace elements but much of its value lies in its insulating quality. Frost may penetrate the leafmold around the roots of your Holly only inches while going down several feet in the surrounding ground. In cold climates the use of leafmold combined with a ground covering of snow makes it possible to grow specimen Hollies that are more compact with better (darker) color than those usually grown further South in what folks consider the Holly belt. Yes, good Hollies can and are being grown way up North. Caution: do not plant on top of a hill in full sweep of wind. Houses, buildings of any sort or evergreen trees are a help as a wind break wherever you want to grow Hollies.

Remember, much that friends have told you about Holly is just not so. Planted right they will grow most anywhere. Its as simple as that.

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ROUTE 130

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